

Indiana House of Representatives

News and Information

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STATEHOUSE REPORT FROM REP. DAVE CROOKS

INDIANAPOLIS – As the first half of the 2005 session of the Indiana General Assembly comes to a close, lawmakers are working at a hectic pace on the major issues that will define this year's Legislature.

Indiana House members completed work on our chamber's version of House Bill 1001, the biennial state budget, and sent it on to the state Senate, where it will be changed to reflect the priorities of that chamber.

While the budget is the most important bill of this session, there are many other subjects to debate, including daylight-saving time, a state inspector general, government efficiency, economic development and the rising cost of prescription drugs.

My concerns about the state budget remain the same, and I voted against House Bill 1001. This budget cuts state support for most schools in Indiana. This budget grossly underestimates the amount of money needed to fund the Medicaid program, which provides health care for those most in need: seniors, children and the disabled. This budget caps the amount of local property tax relief provided by the state through Property Tax Replacement Credits (PTRC), without providing another funding source for relief. These tactics will force local property tax increases, and put this budget in the red.

It is important to remember that the budget bill is a work in progress at this point in the legislative session. In the weeks to come, the Indiana Senate will put its own mark on the budget. Based on early comments from leaders in that chamber, it sounds like they will be more responsive to the needs of our state than the House majority. I anticipate this budget will go through many different versions before we wrap this session up at the end of April.

Next to the budget, daylight-saving time has been the hottest topic in the House. Awaiting final approval is House Bill 1034, which would require 77 counties across Indiana that are currently in the Eastern Time Zone to observe daylight-saving time. Five counties in southeast Indiana are in the Eastern Zone and already observe daylight time, while five counties in northwest Indiana and five in southwest Indiana are in the Central Time Zone and observe daylight time.

This legislation only addresses one part of the time question in Indiana. I offered several amendments in committee and on the House floor that would have ensured the public has a voice in determining whether Indiana should be on Eastern or Central Time. The majority of people in my district would prefer to be on the same time as Chicago rather than New York. I simply wanted the public to have a chance to state their preference, either in referendums or in hearings before the federal government that ultimately would decide if Indiana should change time zones. Unfortunately, the House majority rejected my amendments.

Another issue generating concern at the Statehouse is the governor's proposal to create the post of inspector general. While the stated intention of this position – to help ferret out corruption in government – sounds good, many people worry that this governor's appointee will have greater authority in handling local matters than county prosecutors, who are elected by voters. There also is resentment at the governor's public statements that anyone who raises concerns about the bill must favor corruption. Placing so much authority in one person and the executive branch of government raises serious constitutional questions that must be addressed.

My hope is that we will be able to reach some compromises that allow an inspector general to work on fraud and

corruption, yet also allow local prosecutors to do the job they were elected to perform. Already this session, there has been a bipartisan effort to temper some of the governor's proposals that seem aimed at reducing public participation.

One example is House Bill 1188, which began as the governor's attempt to get rid of numerous boards and commissions that allow Indiana citizens to take part in setting public policy. After legislators on both sides of the aisle raised concerns, the proposal was changed to allow a thorough review of all boards and commissions before any decision is made to eliminate any group. This version is set for final approval in the House.

Next Tuesday (March 1) is the deadline for representatives to approve bills that started in the House. In next week's Report, I will review some of the highlights of the first half of session. In the space I have remaining, let me touch on other highlights from the past week:

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE: House Bill 1008, approved by the full House, will create a state Department of Agriculture and an Office of Rural Affairs. These two agencies will ensure that farming plays a part in any economic development efforts, and that the state will work to improve the quality of life in rural Indiana. Agriculture annually contributes more than \$5 billion to the state's economy.

SMALL BUSINESS: House members approved one measure (House Bill 1822) that will help reduce the impact of unneeded government regulations on small businesses in Indiana. State agencies will be required to provide an economic impact statement before adopting any rule that impacts small businesses, and agency officials will be encouraged to explore alternatives that are less burdensome. There are more than 445,000 small businesses in Indiana, which are responsible for nearly 50 percent of the state's jobs.

AFFORDABLE PRESCRIPTION DRUG PLAN DEFEATED: One disappointment this week came when the House majority defeated an effort to give Hoosiers greater access to more affordable prescription drugs. House Democrats tried to amend House Bill 1745 to enable the state to take part in I-SaveRx, a program that enables consumers to purchase safe and affordable prescription refills from licensed, inspected pharmacies in Canada, Ireland and the United Kingdom.

The program – which is already available in Illinois, Wisconsin, Kansas and Missouri – has enabled participants to see cost savings of up to 50 percent on their prescription drugs. Throughout the rest of this session, I will continue to look for ways to give Hoosiers the chance to purchase affordable medicines to stay healthy.

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This Report can be accessed on the Internet at www.IN.gov/H63